

Conceptual Ideas in Taj Mahal, India

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Abstract

Art creation includes some characteristics that differentiate it from other types of art. These characteristics have an exclusive philosophy. Therefore, familiarization with art consists of variety of phenomenon stemming from historical and cultural backgrounds. Regarding the point that art is considered as one of the humanistic activities with specific meaning in the universe through the history, aesthetic becomes different in civilizations and shapes patterns and icons function. It is worth mentioning that as the main parts of these studies attribute to religious and philosophical concepts, the religion part is always made by mythology in India. Some mythological studies are incorporated in the present research. In accordance with beliefs and social customs, in this part, it has been attempted to discuss about concepts, elements, shapes, numbers, patterns and colors in general categorization and their iconic and symbolic aspects are analyzed in such a way that symbolic aesthetic which is prior to shape is deeply reviewed because in symbolic universe, a positive relationship is formed between environment and user and the represented concepts refer to content.

Keywords: Social custom, art, environment, Taj Mahal

Introduction

If we just focus on the building without paying attention to the primary motivation of its creation, it is similar to studying human's body without considering his soul and identification. Basically, this is spirit that gives the artistic identification to the architecture and painting. Taj Mahal represents itself as an obvious example of an artifact, the one that is created by the most influential power of man, love. Taj Mahal is fully respected among Indians and considered as a symbol of love. Also, it is counted as one of the Seven Wonders of the Universe.

Considering this issue that the Mongolian architects made a spiritual attempt to create space and iconic language in each of their tombs, this tomb is not soulless. Love and the romantic feeling between Shah Jahan and his wife could emerge significantly in this building.

The white and tender body of the building

It is the symbol of Shah Jahan's emotion toward his wife (red and yellow color of flowers on tomb can make the viewer excited). This love contains the perspective of Shah Jahan and also this feeling is penetrated in their tradition, customs. Majority of Indian consider travelling and visiting Taj Mahal as something that can enhance the durability of their marriages.

Paradise

Some orientalist believe that the aesthetic reason in Mongolian gardens is that the builders intended to represent the objective of paradise garden. In other words, Taj Mahal is the symbol of paradise in this universe.

The existence of some worshipped signs and icons in traditional beliefs and in designing Taj Mahal help many scholars interpret some aspects spiritually and allocate religious meaning to them, some of them are described below:

- Garden, flowers, trees: Based on Koranic inscriptions that are mainly about paradise and afterlife, this place is a metaphor of eternity and life and is adapted with a divine model of paradise (Copplesstone, 1963).
- Floral patterned mosaics on pillars, capitals, tomb and in decorations (in realistic and abstract forms) symbolizes the paradise flowers (figure 1 and 2)



Figure 1: Taj Mahal flower details



Figure 2: Taj Mahal floral details

- The entrance of the complex which is the symbol of entrance of holly prophet to the paradise in ascension (Begley & Grabar, 1983).
- The high rise marble pond in the middle of garden which is the symbol of Kovsar
- Four rivers in each four sides are the symbol of four fluid rivers in the paradise.
- The design of octagonal tomb is the symbol of eight doors of paradise.
- It is believed that this organizational structure is inspired by below concepts:
- Chaharsu (the intersection of two main passages of Bazar): is the symbol of materialistic universe and the passage way.
- The front square: it is the symbol of waiting space for preparing the visitors to the garden atmosphere.
- Garden Space: it is the simple symbol of promising paradise
- Tomb: it is the symbol of the presence of man in the paradise

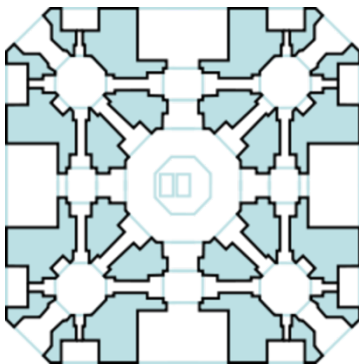


Figure 3. Taj Mahal Plan

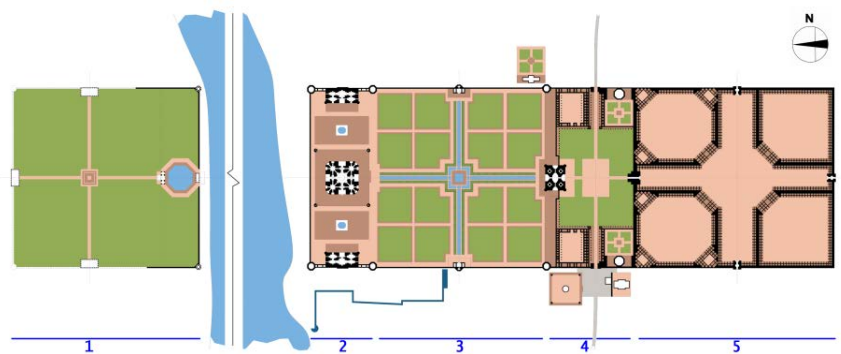


Figure 4. Taj Mahal site plan

Some other researchers believe that the tomb consists of five octagons next to each other in a shape of a rose and moreover they claim that this shape is inspired by a hadith describing paradise as a huge dome made by pearls on top of four walls including Al Rahman and each alphabet has a blessing river. In following, it is said that pearl is the symbol of the universe and its main components (Sanderson, 1937).

The designing based on five attached octagons in form of rose is the symbol of paradise according to a hadith (figure 3 and 4). Rose is referring to the paradise. In order to discover the root of this interpretation, it should be addressed in mythology.

In the mythology, at the beginning, paradise was the territory filled by happiness, lighting and laughing and paradise songs. The glorious court is made of pure gold and shining such as sun.

Yameh is on throne and the delegation in white cloth decorated by golden jewelry is around him and the throne is filled by pleasing songs and odor and flowers (Schimmel, 1976).

Yameh's paradise is not exceptional and Indra and Varuna are competing with it. Varouna is located in the sea and is a court palace surrounded by white walls and paradise trees (Seguy, 1977). Birds singing on the branches of trees and jewelries are the main characteristics of it. Indra paradise has a fortification of paradise trees and melodious birds are singing and it is filled with the odors of trees (ibid, 189).

According to an old story, pious followers before rebirthing spend some time in Indra and others have this privilege as well based on their manners. Perhaps, the above descriptions can be found ironically in Taj Mahal:

- The golden area around the tomb with golden lights and enameled lantern and a gate made by jade is a metaphor of yama paradise and filled with lighting
- Flowers and trees in the garden is metaphor of flowers and trees with bunch of buds
- The location of the building next to the Yamuna River is a metaphor of paradise
- The white color of building is the metaphor of throne in paradise with white walls.

Arrangement of four different directions in this complex has striking features. Bazar, Karwanseri, front field, garden and the platform of tomb have apparent functional and environmental characters. The bazaar is obviously used for commercial purposes, the transition area is allocated to front field and the ideological and divine parts are given to garden and the final area is tomb (Harkness, 2004)

The quality of the arrangement and settlement of the place in relation with each other and based on four areas are in such a way that the order of entering visitors to each area is in accordance with the importance of iconic and spiritual value of the place. This can represent the path of life and its grades for entering the universe as well as its exit (ibid, 98). Perhaps, it can be interpreted as Hindu religions as well.

According to Hindu tradition, time is very regulated and the universe is divided to perfection time (Krata), treata, duality (dvapara) and darkness (Kali). These four ears are differing from each other and their ration toward each other is four to one. Based on the Brahman's people, creation and termination of the universe is a complete period and takes one hundred years of Brahma's life. At the end of this period, all universes (Brahma, Gods, pious, demons, humans, animals and objects) is merging in big universe.

Each massive termination is followed by one hundred years chaos and at the end, another Brahma is born and as a result a new era begins that Kalpa is vital. Each Kalpa is divided to thousands massive era or Mahayuga and itself falls in another four Yuga.

Kritayuga is a golden era that dharma, the God of justice and duty is walking on four legs. People are pleased healthy and virtue and they only worship white God.

Tertayuga is when Dhrama is walking on three legs, virtue and happiness in comparison with past decline up to one-fourth. Brahman are ahead of sinners and worshipped God is in red.

Devapara yoga is when dharma is walking on two legs and virtue and faith becomes half. Worshipped God is yellow and struggle. Lie is common also many people insist on following the right way (Bernier, 1891).

Kali yoga is the degeneration and it is when we are living in it. In this era, Dharama is walking on one leg and helpless and all arts and virtues decreased to one-fourth, God is black and people are sinful and they consider value for nonsense objects. The social stratification system of India is called Caste and nowadays Arian after settling in any territory including India, applied this system in order to avoid hybridity in their following generations. The indigenous tribes were placed in the lowest level of this system. People still maintain these stratifications and by no means intend to quit. Even the Jawaharlal Nehru who had the power for forty years could not change this hierarchical system.

The elements of the complex

The entrance gate

The building of the main gate in garden area is decorated by red stones and marble. It seems solid and sinks in its darkness and it includes very spectacular scenery. It is as if the visitors are looking at the building through a frame.



Figure 5. The Taj Mahal as seen through the entrance gate



Figure 6. A towering arch of the 'Quwwat-ul-Islam' mosque at the 'Qutub Minar' tower complex in Delhi, India.

The historical studies indicate that there is an inevitable resemblance between towering arch of the 'Quwwat-ul-Islam' mosque at the 'Qutub Minar' tower complex in Delhi, India and Taj Mahal entrance gate. Some scholars believe that it is turning point in the history of architecture in India and proves that how Indian architects were inspired by architectural imported elements as an Indian-Islamic style. Therefore, the gate of Taj Mahal is similar to Safavid entrances but with more Mongolian characteristics (figure 5 and 6). There are some other iconic aspects like:

The front area: It is the symbol of middle space and prepares the visitors for entering to the garden area.

The entrance gate of the complex: It symbolizes when the holy prophet enters the paradise. In order to study the history of Taj Mahal's dome, it is worth mentioning that stupa does not look like dome and it is basically different. Some researchers claim that Islamic architecture in India was influenced by bell-shaped stupas in India. Of course, it is vital to say that dome was built in Syria for the first time but it gradually became the most important element in the architecture and especially in tombs (figure 7 and 8).

In India, dome emerged from the very beginning and it became a significant element and a crucial characteristics of Islamic architecture. The Taj Mahal's dome has double shell and was made by marble inside and outside of the building.

The external shape of building with the prominent dome at top was adopted from Iran's architecture. Iranian domes usually were made by double shell to make the harmony with

surroundings and there was a considerable space between two shells. The dome in Taj Mahal can echo the sound and it is the characteristics of double shell domes (ibid, 42)



Figure 7. Sanchi Stupa

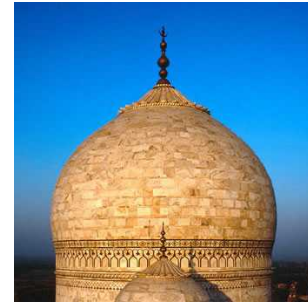


Figure 8. Taj mahal dome

Of course, not only Persian style was used in these domes, also the regional features were respected as well. To give an example, the up to down side of Lotus in top part is different from Persian style. Moreover, there are some iconic features, too.

Tomb with onion domes is the symbol of throne of God and justice in resurrection.

White dome is a metaphor of white pearl for describing the paradise, cited by prophet and it symbolizes what the universe is created from.

The four small domes around the main dome

The four square domes with four copulas or pergola around the main dome is built based on Rajpout architecture that unfortunately it has left a bad impact on the aesthetics of the building. Adding four domes to the main dome raise an important question about the root of this style. Many historians believe that in order to realize this, it should refer to the Hinduism and Brahma thoughts.

As the metaphoric language is the main feature of Taj Mahal, the following iconic description can be interpreted in the buildings:

The four copulas around the main dome is the symbol of main source of power (the all-powerful and all-knowing creator, sustainer, ordained and judge of the universe in the nature among the minor elements (figure 9 and 10).

Mihrabs, blind arcs, tops of the minarets against the main, mihrab, blind arc and main top are built according to this theory (Saksena, 1962). On the other hand, four copulas in four different directions of the main dome is seen in Amir Ismaeil Samanid in Bukhara, therefore, this attributes to Persian architecture.



Figure 9. Main dome and copulas in Taj Mahal



Figure 10. Amir Esmaeil Samanid mausoleum in Bukhara

A finial at the top of dome and its crescent

At first a mark or sign at the top of dome was used by Christians on the top of churches and resembles a cross. Ottomans changed it to crescent and used it in their buildings and then, Muslims applied it to their buildings. But the golden finial at the top of Taj Mahal is remarkable because it is similar to Adil Shahi or Adilshahi dynasty and this family has Turkish origin and was part of Gurkani dynasty and it can justify the application of crescent on top of building. The crescent on top of dome was adopted from Byzantium signs in ancient time. On the other hand, it can be justified differently, as the building was not only a tomb and it showed the power, importance and capability of Mongolian government in India, it could be one of the symbols of shiva which was used for creating and destroying the world and this crescent can summarize the power and authority of Mongols (Koch, 2006).

Minaret

Minaret are mainly used in mosque and the first mosques did not have the minarets but the first mausoleum that had minarets Soltaniyeh, emphasizing the importance of the tomb (figure 11 and 12).

Allocating the sacredness to the building began in Ilkhanid. These changes in India, began in Homayoon tomb which was built without the minarets and after it they were added to the buildings. Additionally, four minarets in four sides are the Gurkani characteristics with a big difference: they were detached from building (Rizvi, 1965). The minarets were detached and they could provide with forming the visual and spatial space and emphasize on the importance of the tomb and also they could be the icon of four elements.

Water front and river

The main building is 300 hundred meters from the main gate and the water front can join the two detached parts. These two environmental features can create visually pleasing scenes and increase the dynamism of the complex.

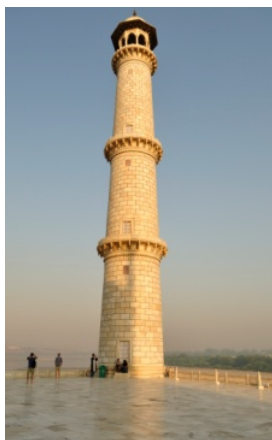


Figure 11. Taj Mahal Minaret



Figure 12. Soltaniyeh Minaret

The iconic meanings are in such a way that waterfront can refer to Jamuna River, the high rise marble pond in the middle of garden is the symbol of Kovsar, and four rivers in each four side are the symbol of four fluid rivers in the paradise.

The location of the river in relation to earth and Iwan of the tomb is located on lower level and it helps the visitors see the Taj mahal as the first visual element and it looks like the latest point in horizon.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that culture and tradition and artistic characteristics of a nation should be considered as an alive creature. As in the formation of a human being the physical and spiritual characteristics and social, psychological and physical conditions are influential and can make significant changes in their identification, these factors with methodical, political and economic circumstances can play a crucial role in the formation of art and architecture. Apparently, the artistic and cultural artifacts cannot be reviewed in just their own eras and sometimes the influential factors date back centuries ago. To do a comprehensive research, the main mythological and cultural aspects of Indian architecture combined with the physical characteristics of Taj Mahal and then, the symbolic and iconic elements were retrieved in such a way that make the connection with Hinduism beliefs.

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